



Strategic Communication in Domestic Disasters

The Military and the Media in an Intergovernmental Environment

By Professor Dennis M. Murphy and Colonel (Retired) Carol Kerr

“...Without timely, accurate information or the ability to communicate, public affairs officers at all levels could not provide updates to the media and to the public.... Federal, State, and local officials gave contradictory messages to the public, creating confusion and feeding the perception that government sources lacked credibility.”

— The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned

BACKGROUND

The United States Army War College’s Center for Strategic Leadership, in conjunction with the National Guard Bureau and the United States Army Reserve, conducted a symposium from 11-12 July 2006 entitled *Improving the Military’s Domestic Crisis Response – Leveraging the Reserves*. Building on insights discovered through After Action Reviews of the military’s response to Hurricane Katrina, the forum examined areas critical to any future domestic response and identified and leveraged specifically applicable capabilities available throughout those components essential to domestic response. The event took place at the U.S. Army War College’s Center for Strategic Leadership, Carlisle Barracks Pennsylvania. The symposium brought together leaders from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) including the U.S. Coast Guard and the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), the Department of Defense (DOD), United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), the military service’s active and reserve components, and other homeland security stakeholders from both the public and civil sectors.

The format of the symposium provided both plenary panel reports and breakout work groups that focused on specific strategic issues regarding Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA). One of those breakout groups specifically considered recommendations to best enable the military to more effectively and efficiently perform its mission in response to an Incident of National Significance (INS) as part of the national response and recovery efforts, and instill public confidence through Strategic Communication. This report reflects the consensus effort of that breakout group in addressing this challenging and important issue.

Strategic Communication is defined as “focused United States Government (USG) efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of USG interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages and products synchronized with the actions of all elements of national power.”¹ In its simplest form, strategic

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¹ Department of Defense, Information Operations Joint Publication 3-13, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 13 February 2006), I-10.

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communication in disasters and catastrophes serves several purposes: first, and prior to the event, it can serve to manage the expectations of the public regarding the capabilities and potential assistance provided at all levels of government; second it provides public information prior to and during the event to facilitate the safety and security of U.S. citizens; and finally, it can, if proactively and effectively used in conjunction with visible ongoing relief efforts, serve to increase the credibility of government and serve as a calming influence to the citizenry. While not considered in the workshop, strategic communication during domestic disasters also serves a foreign policy role. Effective USG strategic communication can portray the United States as a capable, efficient and effective responder to the needs of its people and so send a message to emerging democracies regarding the role of government toward the needs of its citizens. On the other hand, poor USG strategic communication can result in the opposite perception world-wide.

DSCA AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: CHARACTERISTICS AND METHODS

Ultimately, the objective of any Defense Support to Civil Authority (DSCA) operation is to safeguard and protect the population. But while DOD and the military may have the lead in this regard overseas, they take a supporting role when involved in domestic disasters. Specifically, the National Response Plan (NRP) lays out the role of DOD and its subordinate military departments as being in support of the lead federal agency (typically DHS with FEMA as the executive agency). Additionally, a hierarchy of response to disasters is established from local first responders to the state government and then to the federal government based on the size of the event and if it overwhelms the capabilities of any level. DOD, in fact, only acts upon the request of the lead federal agency. While this does not prevent military units from prudent planning and preparation, it does mean that their initiative to act is based on this reality. Interestingly, Hurricane Katrina pointed out that catastrophes can jeopardize this structure and process, particularly when local responders are themselves victims on a large scale.

Beyond the requirements of the NRP one must consider the challenges of the current information environment on U.S. government strategic communication. News comes from many sources to include mainstream broadcast and print journalists to someone on the street with a camera cell phone or a blogger with a laptop and internet service. Images and stories (both accurate and inaccurate, rumor and innuendo) can be transmitted

inexpensively and in real-time. The government (and its military) cannot dominate this environment, so it must ensure that it manages it as effectively and efficiently as possible. It is through the lens of this environment, then, that the role of the military in strategic communication in domestic disasters must be examined.

Managing expectations of the public as to the role and capabilities of military forces in response to disasters is a critical part of strategic communication that can be enabled prior to an incident of national significance. This requires education of military leaders regarding: the role, methods and techniques of media; the news cycle and the competitive business orientation of media outlets; the information environment; and the “wildcards” represented by non-traditional news sources. Correspondingly, it requires education of the media regarding capabilities of the military and its role in response to a disaster. While this cross-education can occur in formal settings, it is perhaps more important that informal, enduring relationships be established between military members (specifically the public affairs community, but also senior leaders) and their media counterparts. Development of these relationships will pay dividends in the midst of a disaster by providing a credible source of information to reporters based on past interaction and by ensuring that reporters tell their stories from a position of background knowledge and not speculation. It also builds trust between the military and the media that is critical to future information sharing.



Once the disaster strikes the military must reemphasize their role and capabilities to the public through the media. In order to manage the information environment it is critical that the public affairs officer have situational awareness of the actions and locations of operational forces as well as the actions and reporting of commercial media. In this way, public affairs officers can keep reporters accurately informed and immediately counter any misinformation that the media may unknowingly report as well as provide a proactive, credible spokesperson whenever and wherever it is most critical. Situational awareness combined with pre-disaster education and military-media relation building is essential to provide an accurate picture to various audiences, to include disaster victims, the American people and the international community.

DSCA AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION: LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

Command guidance and public information processes that charge commanders to engage the public and the news media reflect the fact that public communication is a critical element of mission success in providing military support for domestic disasters. Demand for information from multiple information news producers requires, in turn, a responsive and decentralized process whereby military commanders provide accurate and appropriate information. While a single spokesperson can speak to the overall effort, multiple communicators demonstrating localized efforts in context will align more closely with news producers' objectives, minimize the "soda straw" effect of news coverage from a single location, and can generate positive messages that complement the spokesperson's statements. Commander's intent can appropriately identify public information objectives and public affairs release authority may be decentralized to support subordinate commanders. Further, the public affairs efforts to provide themes and messages, and awareness of existing news coverage will enable commanders to effectively inform and educate the public through the media. The U.S. Coast Guard routinely demonstrates recognition that public perceptions enable effective operations. They achieve decentralized, synchronized communications by establishing shared awareness and quickly disseminating appropriate themes and messages.

Message coordination looms a challenge in intergovernmental operations. The experience of the Hurricane Katrina response points to the fact that efforts to execute unified messages may be sidelined by political exigencies. Motives may be different even if objectives are the same. When multiple governmental agencies are involved, DOD has the opportunity to leverage its credibility and reputation in support of the public information objectives. However, divergent priorities among local, state and federal government may create tension, and may force decisions that could risk that positive reputation. The lesson learned is that military information must ultimately support the overarching objectives of public safety and security without regard to politics even when that information may be in conflict with other governmental spokespersons.

Public experience in receiving and assessing information is critical to a state's demonstrated success in achieving cooperation from its citizens because it acts as a means to manage expectations and instill confidence. When the state of Florida exercises its weather emergency operations, it also exercises the processes by which public information is developed, staffed and disseminated by multiple governmental agencies. Additional effort in virtual exercises will increase understanding of priorities across government agencies. Florida's experience suggests that actual exercise of processes and relationships among civilian agencies, military units and the news media create a foundation of government credibility leading to public trust. "Train as we fight" gains new meaning for military forces that must understand these relationships, and the public whose confidence in government response is developed over time and experience.

The early success of media operations during the combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) offers lessons that can be transferred from the battlefield to the home front. By "embedding" reporters and photographers with combat units, the news media gained access to more units and operations than would otherwise have been safe or feasible. For the U.S. military, embedded media provided a third-party account of actions by all combatants. A domestic disaster environment will differ greatly from combat operations in that the news media will exercise freedom of movement with full access to the disaster area, its victims, and the aftermath. However, the OIF experience of providing the media routine access to military units and commanders in fact should be implemented in domestic disasters in order to mitigate the potential of unintentional media misinformation in this unconstrained environment. While units were directed to integrate news representatives during OIF's combat operations, a

similar integration can be voluntarily established for domestic military responses. By establishing military-media relationships prior to operations, and facilitating news media accompaniment and coverage, the military leader in DSCA provides expedient means to highlight accomplishments in addition to explaining challenges. Additionally, regularly scheduled military briefings defuse problems on multiple levels; the practice commits to engaging the public through the media, updates multiple news organizations simultaneously, and leverages media competition. While the sheer volume of news products defies the military's ability to monitor and correct all errant reports, scheduled briefings provide an opportunity to clarify information to credentialed reporters who speak to large audiences.

Deployment of U.S. military forces within the United States can introduce unexpected perceptions and expectations. Inexperience with military-media relationships risks antagonism, despite the fact that domestic crises create the shared purpose for both military and media representatives to help guide and safeguard fellow citizens. Further, types of uniformed forces, military terminology and interaction with the public can skew perceptions. For example, while psychological operations (PSYOP) cannot be used against U.S. citizens, the capabilities organic to PSYOP forces can significantly support and enhance the dissemination of public information in the midst of a domestic disaster (e.g. loudspeaker teams, handbill production, radio and television broadcast). This capability risks being squandered unless the media is educated appropriately or this capability is translated into a new organizational label for this mission (e.g. "Public Information Platoon"). (Note: During tsunami relief efforts in Indonesia, for example, the term "Comfort Support Group" temporarily supplanted "Carrier Strike Group" to signal the benign purpose of the mission.) Military leaders will promote operational effectiveness by considering the public perception of media images. Images, both positive and negative, send powerful messages. In operations to support civilians, the choice of soft caps over Kevlar helmets sends a potent signal about the military's perceived role. Finally, the role of the leader as communicator takes on more significance in a domestic response operation. Emergencies create crises, crises demand resolution, and the engaged military leader speaking early and accurately can become a powerful symbol of positive action and crisis resolution in managing expectations and instilling public confidence.

CONCLUSION

Strategic Communication during disaster response directly supports the ability of the U.S. government and its military to establish a safe and secure environment for our citizens. Accurate public information is critical. Managing expectations and positively influencing perceptions by proactive education and training is equally important. Senior military commanders must provide accurate messages in conjunction with actions and images that instill confidence. In the end, Strategic Communication is commander's business.

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